

TITLE: Teleconferencing and Crisis Management

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VOLUME: 36    ISSUE: Summer    YEAR: 1992

# STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.

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## Teleconferencing and Crisis Management

David Peterson

**A**t about 1900 hours on 1 August 1990, Washington received the first sketchy reports that Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait early on 2 August (Persian Gulf time). When confirmation was obtained, a meeting of the Deputies' Committee, comprised of representatives of national security departments and agencies, was called. By 2230, when the group convened via a closed-circuit television network, Iraqi troops had entered Kuwait City.

A second meeting of the committee was held at 0645 on 2 August, and another—the third within nine hours—convened later that morning. Each session was chaired by Richard Haass, Senior Director for the Near East on the National Security Council staff. (The designated chairman, Robert Gates, then the President's Deputy National Security Adviser, was not in Washington at the time.) Other attendees included Robert Kimmitt, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs; Paul Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs; Admiral David Jeremiah, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Richard Kerr, who was then Deputy Director of Central Intelligence.

The members of the committee were accompanied and supported by regional experts from their respective organizational staffs. Kerr, for example, was assisted by the Chief of the Near East Division in CIA's Directorate of Operations (DO); the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia; and the Chief of the Persian Gulf Division in the Directorate of Intelligence (DI) and his senior analyst.

The committee considered several operational proposals and possible countermeasures. A key recommendation that was discussed and implemented

within hours was the freezing of Iraqi and Kuwaiti assets in US banks. After consulting Treasury Department officials and the Federal Reserve Bank, an Executive Order was written and taken before dawn to President Bush for his signature.

Not putting too fine a point on it, CIA's Senior Duty Officer wrote in his log, "It was a busy night." It also was a textbook example of how technology has transformed the business of crisis management, bringing "teleconferencing" to its lexicon.

### SVTS

The medium for the Deputies' Committee's deliberations during those hectic hours was the Secure Video Teleconferencing System (SVTS). The system was developed to enable the President and his senior national security advisers to confer without leaving their own buildings, and it proved its worth throughout the Persian Gulf crisis. Committee members sat in or near their respective communications centers so that any new information could be shared immediately. (In CIA's Operations Center that night, the Chief of the Near East Division had direct telephone contact [redacted] (b)(1) files, maps, photography and other background (b)(3)(n) material were readily accessible.

For several weeks thereafter, the Deputies' Committee used the SVTS to meet daily, including on weekends. The meetings tapered off to an average of three times per week during the succeeding months before the allied offensive to liberate Kuwait. Throughout this period, the Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) and numerous other interagency groups also used the network to confer on Gulf-related matters. Activity on the system increased again in the weeks leading up to, and following, the allied attack on 16 January 1991.

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### The Oil Spill

Interactive SVTS media were especially valuable when the Intelligence Community was tracking the Iraqi oil spill. Shortly before the allied offensive, suspicion mounted that tankers the Iraqis were loading in Kuwait might be used as "floating bombs" to oppose the expected seaborne assault by US Marines. Then an oil slick was sighted at one of Kuwait's off-shore loading terminals.

The Department of State promptly called for a teleconference. In addition to the usual national security agencies, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the US Coast Guard, and the Department of Energy were represented. A US official in Saudi Arabia participated by telephone.

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directing that certain steps be taken to improve crisis-management operations. One was to incorporate use of the SVTS in order "to improve lateral and vertical dissemination of information and guidance." A Supplement to the National Security Directive on Crisis Management was issued on 25 October stating that "the NSC Deputies' Committee shall be responsible for day-to-day crisis management, reporting to the National Security Council."

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These new arrangements thus were in effect on 19 December 1989, when the Deputies' Committee assembled via SVTS to monitor Panamanian and foreign reaction to US intervention in Panama, "Operation Just Cause." The group remained in virtually continuous session from 2330 that night until about 0700 the next morning. On succeeding days, it met once in the morning and again near the end of the day to review events. There was marked improvement in the coordination and flow of information to senior officials and in the associated decisionmaking process.

### Panamanian Precedent

Before teleconferencing could become commonplace for national security deliberations, the deficiencies inherent in operating without its technological advantages had to be exposed. In such instances, participants in high-level interagency meetings would consume precious time before assembling at the White House Situation Room. During these sessions, they had only remote telephonic and electronic contacts with the operations centers, supporting personnel, and other organizational assets at their home bases.

The cumbersome and inefficient nature of this arrangement was painfully obvious during the unsuccessful coup attempt in Panama on 3 October 1989. Senior US policymakers, who did not use SVTS on that occasion, did not receive timely information, and, as a result, the departments and agencies concerned each had known only part of what was happening in Panama at critical stages of the uprising.

Gates, after the Deputies' Committee he chaired had reviewed the lessons learned from the Panama experience, distributed a memorandum in late October

### Other Situations of Note

During the interim before Operation Just Cause started, the new emphasis on teleconferencing in fact had already improved DI support for crisis management.

- When Salvadoran rebels mounted their "November" offensive in 1989, the network was used extensively for meetings of the Deputies' and Policy Coordinating Committees. During the height of the fighting, Intelligence Community analysts participated in as many as four teleconferencing meetings per day.

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By the spring of 1990, when the USSR began to disintegrate, the national security community had become comfortable with teleconferencing. March and April were especially busy months for Soviet watchers. Five meetings of the Deputies' Committee and eight of the PCC, each concentrating on Lithuania, were held on SVTS during that period. The Baltics also were the focus of attention in January 1991, when the Deputies met on the network three times and the PCC used it on six occasions.

### Pluses and Minuses

The sources for this article were unanimous in acknowledging the psychological advantages of conferencing by teleconference. They agreed with the observation that it provides a unique bonding experience. Assembling frequently in this format, they concur, promotes informality and greater participation. Principals have more eye contact while facing each other through the video cameras, there is less side chatter, and the meetings as a consequence are shorter and better focused. This makes it possible to pull together interagency views in a matter of hours, expediting the preparation of a coordinated Intelligence Community product.

The benefits also extend to members of the supporting cast. One of them pointed out that use of the SVTS permitted his attendance and that of other backup personnel, all of whom otherwise would not

have been present if the principals had assembled at the White House. In addition to enabling them to contribute their expertise directly, these subordinates got to know each other better, and professional relationships were established that flourished even outside the formal meetings.

There is a negative side to repeated teleconferencing. The frequency during a crisis can fuel the policymakers' insatiable demand for the latest news, according to one veteran of such conferences. The pressure to provide a fresh assessment of the situation at each meeting virtually compels intelligence officers to offer the latest tidbit from the field, raising the risk that misleading and possibly erroneous information will be passed. As a consequence, both DO and DI officers ought to be cognizant of this danger and provide cautionary notice.

The pluses, however, clearly overbalance the minuses by a wide margin, and the efficacy of using SVTS is well established. The USSR is gone, but important US interests will be at risk as post-Cold War reordering progresses around the world. Whenever major international crises arise involving those interests, Washington's response almost certainly will follow the now-familiar pattern: intelligence coordination and policy formulation will begin at a teleconference.

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